

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Paul and Profitable”

Philemon

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This little book of Philemon has some really big ideas in it. And ideas guaranteed to bother if not offend most of us in the room.

This letter gives us a little peek at Paul’s life in his last days. He’s been on the journey for a long time now. He’s been traveling... preaching. And certainly he’s grown and known plenty of transformation since he first heard the voice of Christ calling to him.

Paul is in Rome...

under house arrest.

He’s in prison...

Circumstances which, I suspect, took him even to another level of understanding of the gospel.

He has a new friend there in Rome... guy by the name of Onesimus... who is a runaway slave. Somehow he and Paul met and Paul led him to become a follower of Christ and so now Onesimus is hanging with Paul, helping him, and for sure, learning from him.

Onesimus means “profitable.” (Did you like the alliterative sermon title? It was a just too great a temptation to pass that one up.) Paul and Profitable... are doing life in Rome... that’s the context of this text.

And one day, Profitable goes to see Paul, and Paul seems a little different, he’s quieter than normal. Profitable asked him what’s wrong and he hands him a letter and says, **“I want you to take this to Philemon.”**

Profitable, Onesimus, recoiled... Philemon was his owner, the one he’d run away from. One day, he just couldn’t stand not being free any longer and so he left and went to the big city and got lost. But then he got found in a big way by Paul... who’d become like a father to him.

And so, Profitable is standing there in shock holding what he figures amounts to his death warrant... being asked by his idol, Paul... to hand deliver it himself. I’d hate to be in Onesimus’ sandals.

He’s a runaway slave

and that’s about the worst title you could have in those parts.

Slaves were property and masters could treat them however they liked.

“Kill them if you like, they’re your property.” At the very least a runaway slave would have an “F” branded on his forehead... **“fugitivus”**... White hot iron... **“Fugitive”**, right there.

Often, it seems, they went further and they crucified their runaway slaves. ... **Had to keep the slaves in the place, you know.** Barclay says there were over 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. A slave revolt would be a dangerous thing and so masters need to **“show a slave who’s boss.”**

It also appears from Paul's letter that Profitable has probably stolen from Philemon. Double jeopardy... Paul is asking this son in the faith, a runaway slave, to go back to his owner and he's asking a thief to go back to his victim...

I'm wondering about the conversation that took place. I suspect, it was what folks call a teachable moment. And as Paul began to teach him, the lesson was all about submission.

That's what this story is about...

That's what this letter is all about...

And some of it's going to bother you... I promise.

For starters... when Philemon opens the letter, it isn't just addressed to him. It's addressed to his sister and to Archippus another leader, and finally to the entire church which meets in his home. Now mind you, Paul is writing to Philemon... he addresses Philemon and the situation with Philemon's slave.

His property...

His money stolen...

His life.

But Paul invites the community of faith into things. Paul, it seems, makes this everybody's business.

I think I might be a little miffed if I were Philemon.

**"What business is this of my sister's
and why does Archy need to be in on this
or anyone else in the church?**

My slave, my business, my decision?"

Not according to Paul. Not only does he address the entire letter to the church but in verse 12 when he says, **"I'm sending him back to you,"** he uses a legal term, **"I'm referring this case to you."** It's plural... he's suggesting the church be the jury.

And we Western folk with modern mindsets, are squirming in our individualistic Sunday best, aren't we. This is downright unAmerican, isn't it. Personal is personal. What happens behind closed doors is none of any body's business. Why should the church get a vote?

It's my slave not the community's...

my business...

my behavior.

And Paul, very subtly challenges that thinking.

So, here we are as Western Christians... reading this... The music in the background... the Musac (sp?) is Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way," and we're listening to Paul turn what is private into something public and Paul is doing it because...

Because...

there's no clean split between what is private and what is public...

our interior life and our life in community.

There's no such thing.

What you do and who you are matters in the community and in the world. That's

just the way it is...

The life that is lived Monday to Saturday influences the life we experience on Sunday. I'm not suggesting here that everything in your life is the church's business... but I am telling you that everything you do or don't do, will make a difference here and in other places of relationship.

There is no such thing as private sin or virtue. The wall between our private and public selves is artificial. **"When we get behind closed doors,"** we're fooling ourselves if we think that our actions and thoughts in there make no difference out here, in our relationships.

They just matter.

Life is too interconnected...

we are too communal.

You are only a self in relationship, so whoever you are down under where we cannot see will matter "out here" where we all live.

And beyond that... we're followers of Jesus and Jesus has invited us all to the way of submission... the way of descent. We don't live above... doing things **"our way,"** we live below... we get beneath.

Paul isn't just dealing with the legalities of his culture here. Not even primarily... he's dealing with the church and with the gospel way of things.

So first, he submits...

he sends this servant back...

even though he really didn't have to...

He really did "have to" for the sake of the gospel and for his own sake and for the sake of the church. Paul lived submissively with Philemon.

And then he invited Philemon to do that with the church... and also with the gospel. Submit to something even larger than Roman law or personal charisma or debt. **"I appeal to you,"** he wrote, **"On the basis of love. I could pull rank as your spiritual father but I'm not... I'm appealing to Love."**

Paul isn't just following the legal code or even relational protocol here... he's inviting them to live the gospel. It matters to the church and to the message of Christ how Onesimus is treated.

If he shows up next week for church with an "F" branded on his forehead it's going to change the way worship feels. They all stand to sing, **"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"** and there stands Onesimus still hurting from the hot iron. How do they give authentic witness to God's grace when their leader has none for those in his care?

How do you preach, **"In Christ there is no slave or free..."** With Onesimus sitting on the back row in rags? How do you call people to forgiveness when they know Onesimus is under your thumb and under your condemnation and branded with your revenge.

Philemon had a right to Onesimus... but then again... he didn't. Because the gospel changes everything. Paul says, **"I'm not just sending him back as a slave but as a dear brother... deal with it. If we're partners, welcome him like you would me."** In other words... **"Roll out the red carpet for your runaway slave."**

Wouldn't you like to see Philemon's face as he reads this?

Was it tensed up in anger?

Was it flat with astonishment?

Did some instinct knot up within him... **"My rights... What about me?"**

Justice... Rules... What's coming to me?"

Maybe he sat for a long time. I suspect he did. Battling... **"Man... following Jesus is hard."** And then he'd think about Jesus' words... **"Anyone who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."**

He was starting to see... finally see... the depths of what Jesus had been talking about. It'd almost be easier to be a Martyr than let this slide... It was like letting a part of himself go. It was getting beneath and everything in him... everything... wanted to be above and he was being called to empty himself.

Paul's letter wasn't just for Onesimus' sake... it was also for Philemon and for Paul's and for that little church's. Because, paradoxically, only in a downward descent can we ascend with Christ. We have to die with him to rise with him...

So everyone in this little story is submitting.

Paul to the law and to his friend.

Philemon to the church and to the gospel...

And certainly Onesimus is submitting.

What's he thinking as he makes the trip back. **"Slavery is wrong... it's inhuman... it's beyond a shadow of a doubt Unchristian... Jesus wouldn't stand for it."** But for that moment in time, it was the way it was... and Onesimus was having to submit to that.

Anybody... really bugged by that? That sometimes... we simply must submit to what is...to the way things are?

Onesimus was with Paul when he wrote these words to Titus (that sits next door in the cannon), **"Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything.** Onesimus is looking over his shoulder as he writes... **"Try to please your masters, don't talk back to them..."** Paul wrote in Ephesians, **"Slaves obey your masters."** And 2000 years later, lots of us are really bugged, aren't we.

As horrible and sinful as the institution of slavery was, Paul didn't not condemn it. Who knows why not? Perhaps it was just so ingrained in his world it couldn't yet perceive of a world where the playing field was level? Maybe he was afraid that Christianity in it's infancy would be associated with a slave uprising... bad PR? Certainly (and he makes this clear in his writings) he was hoping that the slaves would reflect the gospel to their masters.

In spite of all his pleas with Philemon for mercy and for good treatment, he still sends Onesimus back and acknowledges that he is property. **"I will pay you,"** he says. Even though he's a brother in the church, he's still a slave in society.

We live in a real world... an ethical reality... with real people and real problems and sometimes we can only move forward by accepting what is. It's that way in society, it's that way in community... in relationships.

You'd like your spouse to change, you'd change them if you could.
 You'd like a certain relationship to be easier
 and for the school system to be less bureaucratic
 and work to be more fair
 and your political leaders more upstanding.

You'd like your parents to be more understanding. We'd like our kids to be more complaint. You'd like your church to be more.... whatever and we do work to make things better.

But sometimes you just have to accept what is. It's not that you let go of values or loose your integrity but not every battle can be fought at once. Not every battle can be won right away, the leaven of the kingdom takes time to work. Sometimes you accept what is.

You submit and as you do, you trust your life and life itself into God's care. Our ultimate reality isn't our circumstances... even the one's that enslave us. Some sacrifices aren't chosen and maybe they're the one's God uses the most.

We don't know the end of the story here... what Philemon did with Onesimus.

There are, however, historians who have guessed at it. Ignatius writes some fifty years after this letter was written. He is writing on his way to Rome to be executed. The letters he pens on his way to his death, still survive.

When he's at Smyrna he writes to the church at Ephesus and in the letter, he goes on and on, he comments at length about their wonderful bishop... who happens to go by the name of Onesimus. (see Barclay p. 275)

Makes you wonder, huh?

Why is this letter here?

What's Philemon doing in the cannon?

I mean, Paul no doubt wrote hundreds, probably thousands, of personal letters. There's not much else to do in prison. After you've played Old Maid for a while, letter writing was the past-time of choice.

This is the only letter of its kind in the Bible. The first collection of Paul's letters was in the church of Ephesus, where someone named Onesimus was the bishop, about the turn of the century. All those personal letters and this one makes it in.

Was it the early church's way, was it Onesimus' way... of saying look what can happen to a slave and to a community when people submit themselves to the gospel of Jesus.

Slave turned Bishop. **Bishop Profitable.** The one forgiven becomes the proclaimer of grace.

We really never know what might happen in church or in the world... in any set of circumstances... when we give ourselves to the gospel. Our task isn't really to change the world... it's to follow Jesus and be like Jesus.

Changing the world... or even a former slave or slave owner... is what God does in the process. Our task is simply to let go. Our calling is to surrender... Our invitation is to trust ourselves and life into God's care. Amen.